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WHAT TO DO WITH THE MOTION-PICTURE SHOW: SHALL IT BE CENSORED?¹

BY FREDERIC C. HOWE

CHAIRMAN OF THE NATIONAL BOARD OF CENSORSHIP OF MOTION PICTURES

"**W**HAT shall we do about the motion-picture show?" is a question that is being asked in every town of consequence in the country. It is a question which rises in volume when films which portray sex questions, the white slave traffic, or the social evil make their appearance. It will be raised again when the movie begins to portray labor struggles, conditions in mine and factory; when it becomes the daily press of industrial groups or classes, of Socialism, syndicalism, and radical opinion.

Shall pictures which honestly and with reasonable accuracy portray any or all of these questions be suppressed, because they deal with unconventional or forbidden topics; because they tend to excite class feeling or, as is alleged, tend to bring discredit upon the agencies of government? And, if not suppressed, to what extent should they be censored, and how?

To many people the question presents little difficulty, for we, more than any people in the world, have adopted a repressive policy toward things we do not like. There are some, though a diminishing number, who would suppress the motion picture entirely. They feel about it much as they do about the saloon. There is a very much larger group which would suppress all films which deal with subjects which they do not wish to think about, which offend their sense of propriety. They would censor all subjects which even incidentally as a necessary part of the drama portray crime, vice, the seamy side of life, or the baser passions in any form; films which deal with the social evil or the sex problem. They would justify their censorship on the ground that these subjects should not be discussed in public, that they should not be portrayed upon the stage or be given even such publicity as is afforded by the press.

Still another group would leave the motion-picture art as free as possible, to develop in its own way, to portray every side of life, leaving to the community, through the selective power of the audience and the exhibitor,

to determine what subjects should be presented. The latter group justifies its attitude by saying that any kind of interference is dangerous; that censorship would be destructive of the freedom of the press, of art, or of literature; that it has not proved effective as regards the drama in England; and that, even aside from these considerations, no group of persons, no matter how wisely selected, can possibly guide or control any social expression without imperiling that freedom which is essential to artistic development. To this group the motion picture is no different from the daily press, the theater, or any other form of communication. The facts that the movie appeals to millions, that it is democracy's theater, and by reason of its flexibility can be used to portray many things not possible to the stage, do not alter the essential question of the right of freedom.

THE MAGNITUDE OF THE MOTION-PICTURE BUSINESS

Before discussing these divergent points of view, let us briefly consider the motion picture as a business and a factor in the daily life of the people.

There are from 16,000 to 20,000 motion-picture theaters in the United States. They entertain from 7,000,000 to 12,000,000 persons daily, or from 2,000,000,000 to 3,000,000,000 persons a year. One hundred and fifty million dollars is invested in motion-picture productions, upon which the American public spends approximately \$300,000,000 a year. The average cost of films is \$1 a foot. It may run up to \$8 or \$10 a foot. The production of the film "Richard III" cost \$30,000. One thousand actors, 200 horses, a three-masted war-ship crowded with soldiers, and five battle scenes were included in the production. "From the Manger to the Cross" cost over \$200,000.

The largest film plant in the world is located in California. It turns out fourteen complete plays every week; it employs 220 regularly salaried actors and actresses and six directors. In addition there are from 500 to 600 other people employed. The company uses 1,200

¹Editorial discussion of the question here involved appears in another place.—THE EDITORS.

acres of land in the staging of its productions, and sends out 14,000 feet of negatives every week, which are shipped to studios in New York, where from 150,000 to 200,000 feet of positive films are made.

In Dallas, Texas, it has been estimated that one-third of the population goes to motion-picture shows daily; that in Cleveland, Ohio, one-fifth goes each day. In Chicago there are 650 motion-picture theaters, and 50 vaudeville houses in addition which show films. There is scarcely a village that has not one or more motion-picture houses, all supplied through groups of producers, which act as clearing-houses for the exchanges in each State, which exchanges sell the films to the producing houses on a rental basis.

This indicates the magnitude of the motion-picture business, which has grown with unparalleled rapidity during the last few years. Two hundred and forty-two subjects presented to the National Board of Censorship in one month for examination showed the following distribution of subjects:

Farce	57
Comedy	26
Drama and tragedy	82
Melodrama	52
Trick and novelty	6
Scenic and industrial	19
Total.....	242

In January, 1914, 532 films were presented to the Board. The most inaccessible corners of the earth are being explored by the camera man, while the life of the insect and the plant, of the arctics and the tropics, of the Wild West and the city, are being portrayed to somewhere in the neighborhood of one-tenth of our population every day. Next to the daily press and the school the movie is probably the most influential educational and recreational agency in our daily life. That is one reason why the question of its freedom is of such far-reaching significance.

SOME EFFECTS OF THE MOTION-PICTURE SHOW

No one can trace the influence of the motion-picture show in opening the minds of people to new experiences, new realms of knowledge, new ambitions. It is impossible to measure the contribution which it makes to the mind of the child accustomed to learn only through parents and teachers. Nor can we trace its social or moral influences. Some

months ago a reporter on one of the metropolitan newspapers came to me and asked for an interview on the influence of the motion-picture show on the saloon. He stated that many saloon-keepers in New York were complaining that their business was falling off. They attributed this to the competition of the motion-picture show. I made some inquiries, and found that this was true. An investigation was made in Pennsylvania, which showed that of the total number of saloons in one county only about thirty reported that they were making money, and forty per cent of the remainder placed the blame for the decline in profits almost entirely on the motion-picture show. A similar investigation was made in Washington, D. C.

Men now take their wives and families for an evening at the movies, where formerly they went alone to the near-by saloon.

On the other hand, the motion-picture show is affecting the reading public. The librarian of a public library in San Antonio, Texas, is reported to have said that the falling off in the number of books issued from the library, in comparison with that of previous years, is to be ascribed to the competition of the movies. The same complaint, in greatly exaggerated form, comes from the regular theaters, which no longer enjoy any gallery patronage at all. The commercial decline of the theater is largely attributable to the competition of the movie.

These are but a few of the unknown, unseen influences which this colossal commercial agency of publicity has set in motion. To those who would act heedlessly or under the spur of some local repressive agitation on the subject I would suggest that they think through the question, into all of the good and the bad, the immediate and the ultimate, for they are dealing with a force almost as potential as the daily press. Moreover, no one can be sure of the moral effects of any book, drama, or portrayal of fact or fiction that is not obviously vulgar, suggestive, or alluring.

ORGANIZATION OF THE NATIONAL BOARD OF CENSORSHIP

The National Board of Censorship of Motion Pictures was organized five years ago, in March, 1909, by the People's Institute of New York. The scope of the Board is National as well as local. It came into being after an exhaustive study of the whole subject by Professor Charles

Sprague Smith, the Director of the Institute, and John Collier, who subsequently became the general secretary of the Board. It was organized as a regulative force between the producers, on the one hand, and the public, on the other. Many of the producers welcomed its creation, and the great majority of them now accept its decision as final. At the present time ninety-eight per cent of all the films publicly exhibited in the country are inspected by the Board, those which escape its censorship being almost entirely limited to the special-feature films, owned by companies which produce single films and sell the State rights without the intervention of a selling company. The number of films which were presented to the Board in January, 1914, was 532 (containing 801 reels), or 133 per week. Of these 5 films were condemned entirely, 83 eliminations and changes were made, and 444 were approved by the Board as presented. Each week the Board issues a bulletin enumerating the films presented, the action of the Board upon them, the films condemned, and the changes ordered made, which bulletin is distributed to mayors, chiefs of police, censoring organizations, and voluntary groups throughout the country which have voluntarily organized to enforce the decrees of the Board.¹ For the National Board has no legal position. It exercises its power through moral coercion and the acquiescence of many of the producers in this form of censorship. If a producer refuses to abide by the action of the Board, pressure is brought to bear upon him by the rejection of his output by local agencies throughout the country, which, if continued long enough, will bankrupt his concern, destroy his standing, or seriously cripple his business. All films inspected are presented to the Board before distribution to the country at large.

But the Board does not consider the destruction of films as its most important work. The most valuable results are to be found in the gradual improvement of the quality of motion pictures and in the elimination from all the films of certain undesirable motives, which, in the opinion of the Board, should not be portrayed to audiences containing a considerable percentage of children. The

Board also encourages films of an educational, civic, and seriously dramatic character.

The censoring work is all done by voluntary committees, representing the philanthropic and civic organizations of New York. Over one hundred persons give a portion of their time to this work. They are divided into groups of from five to ten persons, each of which meets on stated days for the viewing of films. Above the Censoring Committee is the General Committee of twenty-four members, made up of representatives of the Young Men's Christian Association, Charity Organization Society, Children's Aid Society, League for Political Education, Federation of Churches, New York City Federation of Women's Clubs, the Public Education Association, the National Committee of the Young Women's Christian Association, the People's Institute, and eight members-at-large. To this General Committee appeals may be taken from the action of the Censoring Committee.

The actual executive work is performed by a staff of five secretaries, who have no voice in the censoring. The films are inspected in studios provided by the companies, of which there are four. The Board may take any one of three actions: it may approve a film, recommend alterations, or condemn it *in toto*.

As soon as action is taken the producer is notified in writing by the secretary, who follows up the decisions of the Board by an inspection of the New York theaters, by the examination of motion-picture trade papers; he has the co-operation of local censoring boards and public officials in other cities throughout the country. If the Board finds that a manufacturer neglects to present a film to the Board or refuses to carry out its orders, all relations between the owner of the film and the Board are immediately terminated. It is a standing rule of the Board that it must review in advance all of a manufacturer's product or none of it, and that it will continue this work only so long as the manufacturer abides by the Board's recommendations.

STANDARDS OF JUDGMENT OF THE NATIONAL BOARD OF CENSORSHIP

The National Board of Censorship has in five years passed on 20,000 film subjects. In the course of its censoring it has been compelled to answer almost every possible question relating to ethics, good taste, and the public welfare. In reaching conclusions as to the goodness or badness of a film, it

¹In this connection it might be said that the Board invites the co-operation of local organizations, and welcomes their aid in the inspection of local productions and the enforcement of its decrees. Approximately two hundred local agencies are in weekly correspondence with the New York office.

tries to judge by the spirit rather than by the letter, and by the net reaction of the play rather than by any particular part of it. It is never possible to say in advance how the Board will act on a given scenario, for the decision of the Board depends upon its estimate of the probable effect of the picture on the average audience.

The standards of judgment announced by the Board are as follows :

1. The Board prohibits obscenity in all forms.
2. The Board prohibits vulgarity when it offends or when it verges toward indecency, unless an adequate moral purpose is served.
3. The Board prohibits the representation of crime in such a detailed way as may teach the methods of committing crime except as in the judgment of the Board the representation serves as a warning to the whole public.
4. The Board prohibits morbid scenes of crime, where the only value of the scene is its morbidity or criminal appeal.

Nevertheless, the Board cannot judge films exclusively from the standpoint of children, of delicate women, of the emotionally morbid, or of any one class of audience. But the Board does take into consideration, as one of the controlling motives governing it, the fact that possibly twenty-five per cent of the total motion-picture audience is made up of children under sixteen.

5. The Board prohibits the unnecessary elaboration or prolongation of scenes of suffering, brutality, vulgarity, violence, or crime.

6. The Board prohibits blasphemy, by which is understood the careless or wanton or unnecessary offense against religious susceptibilities of any large number of people in the country.

7. The Board prohibits anything obviously or wantonly libelous in films, anything calculated to cause injury to persons or interests from an obviously malicious or libelous motive, and films dealing with questions of fact which relate to criminal cases pending in the courts.

But the Board does not censor motion pictures from the standpoint of protecting the exhibitor or manufacturer from the consequences of producing a film which may alienate some powerful element in the community. To illustrate: the Board would permit the production of a film containing a non-libelous attack on a great political party, even though the circulation of this film would result in making enemies for the producer of the films, or for the whole motion-picture business.

The Board does not, in judging films, allow itself to be influenced by the moral character of persons who may be concerned in the production or acting of the films. But the Board does retain the right to forbid, at its discretion, the exploitation of unworthy reputations, such as

the morbid representation of persons who may have been associated with famous criminal cases.

8. In addition to the above specifications, the Board feels in general that it is right in forbidding scenes or films which, because of elements frequently very subtle which they contain, have a deteriorating tendency on the basic moralities or necessary social standards.

In explanation of its standards the Board has issued the following statement :

The Board does not enforce on motion pictures simply its own views of what is desirable and right. The Board tries to eliminate its own personal equation completely. It tries to judge as to the real effect of each film on the composite audience which will witness it. Having reached a conclusion on this point, the Board then tries to act on behalf of the general conscience and intelligence of the country, in permitting or prohibiting a given scene or film. The Board's hardest task is to decide what is this general conscience of the country. The general conscience of the country believes in free speech on religious and political matters; in the right of people to live and enjoy themselves in the way they see fit, so long as fundamental morality is not injured; to insure a certain amount of freedom both to speech, to art, and to conduct is a part of the conscience of the country, as much as to forbid obscene and demoralizing speech and art and to prevent destructive actions. The above statement will have to take the place of a complicated and philosophical discussion which might be introduced at this point.

The Board does not regard itself as a censor of taste, unless it is clear that the question of taste is an essentially moral question.

The Board does not regard itself as a censor of accuracy, unless the inaccuracy in question is of a libelous kind, or will result in some concrete disaster to the person whom the inaccuracy misleads. Only the latter statement needs to be illustrated, and it may be said in way of illustration that the Board would not approve a film conveying, under the guise of scientific truth, the idea that tuberculosis can be cured by means of patent medicines.

The Board is not responsible for the posters, handbills, or other advertising which may be given out concerning motion pictures. These are often sensational, sometimes misleading, and need to be controlled by local authorities all over the country, but it is impossible for the Board of Censorship to be responsible for them, as it passes only on films.

DIFFICULTY IN APPLYING STANDARDS

Difficult as is the formation of standards, the application of these standards to specific

films presents even greater difficulties. To one person wrongs can only be corrected by letting in the light. To him the white slave film (in so far as it contains no suggestive or alluring features) is highly educational. It produces hatred and disgust of vice and wrong-doing. It educates millions who have no other means of knowledge of what is going on in the underworld. To another any portrayal of vice or crime awakens curiosity and the inclination to imitate. It is dangerous. They say: "Treat sex through experts, by trained teachers in the subjects."

The Wild West Show, the saloon, the dance-hall and cabaret (the French importation), such plays as "Camille," the dramatization of the "House of Bondage," the street life of New York—all of these are debatable subjects, over whose propriety members of the Board differ constantly. Different minds react differently on the same subject-matter, and quite generally the male members of the Board react differently from the women members.

THE QUESTION OF OFFICIAL CENSORSHIP

At the present time in a number of States there is an agitation for official censorship of all motion-picture films. Aside from the question of the constitutionality of such censorship is the question of the *ultimate* effect of the assumption by the State of the right of regulating this most important avenue of expression. Should the State pass upon the desirability of the portrayal of labor questions, of Socialism, the Industrial Workers of the World, and the insistent issues which are crowding to the fore? Should it extend its censorship to the drama, and, if the answer is affirmative, why not to the press? If such censorship is provided for, will not this great field of dramatic expression be subjected to the fear of suppression, so that only the safe

and sane, the purely conventional, the uncontroversial film will be produced? For it must be remembered that the cost of the ordinary film ranges from \$1,500 to possibly \$50,000, and the whole investment might be destroyed by an act of the Government, working through a board which may or may not reflect the political, social, or industrial bias of the Administration in power. Certainly this would be a menace hanging over every producer who entered the field of industrial agitation. Then the control of this official board would be a prize worth struggling for—a prize comparable to the control of the Associated Press, and almost as dangerous to the freedom of the country.

That these dangers inhere in any form of censoring is admitted. It inheres in purely voluntary censorship like that of the National Board, and it was a realization of all these dangers that led to the provision for a large membership in the Censoring Committee and the inclusion of as many different types, interests, and activities as possible. A voluntary board, too, may come to prize its powers. It may become inflexible, intolerant, or class-conscious. It may be repressive. Only eternal vigilance of all the factors involved will guard against these dangers. And under the wisest of guidance mistakes of judgment will undoubtedly be made. But, whatever the accidental judgment of particular films or the errors in opinion as to what should be shown, none of these immediate or temporary evils compare in seriousness with the danger to the art itself from the ascendancy of a point of view which would stifle, or threaten to stifle, the freedom of this industry as a mirror of the every-day life, hopes, and aspirations of the people. For the motion-picture show is not only democracy's theater, it is a great educational agency, and it is likely to become a propagandist agency of unmeasured possibilities.